

THE FRONT

EARNING A CHARM SCHOOL DIPLOMA

Dis Manners

Why are you in that wide-legged position again? Are you carrying packages?" James Carter, the silken-voiced president of the Ophelia DeVore School, is joking—but he's also teaching.

Demonstrating a suave anti-strut in a recent class, the dapper 51-year-old etiquette instructor assesses the gait-and-pivot of his seven pupils—six black, one Latino—in DeVore's Executive Course for Men.

For 50 years, the DeVore School has been mainstreaming minorities into the corporate and modeling realms. Discouraging street styles such as low-riding jeans and ghetto slang might lead some to call it *Pygmalion* in New York. But DeVore instructor Sandy Wilson, pert and fortyish, insists, "You can't be true to yourself if it's not compatible with what your employer wants."

One thing DeVore believes employers want is power-lunch protocol. One lesson finds Wilson presiding over a table set with champagne glasses and a radio oozing Kenny G. "If one person picks up incorrectly, it throws the whole table off," Wilson explains with gravitas. "So: Where does the napkin go?"

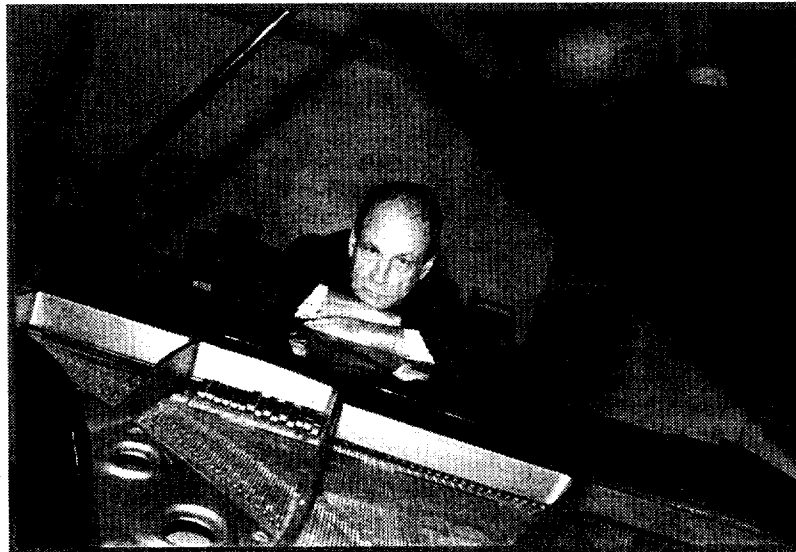
"Underneath the plate," replies Shariff, who at 14 is the class baby.

"On the plate, or in the glass," Dwayne ventures.

"Sometimes," Wilson concedes. "But where does it go in a posh restaurant—where it's not on the plate, in the glass, or wrapped around the silverware?"

"They do that at Sizzler," Shariff observes. Wilson reluctantly answers her own question.

Tim, a 26-year-old hairstylist who



Silent-film pianist Stuart Oderman: *High Noon* and *Looney Tunes*

yearns to parlay his 5-11, 253-pound frame into a career as a "full-figured supermodel," volunteers a scenario that sorely tests the charm he's paying \$750 to acquire. "Say I pick you up, and you're not ready? If...you're first putting on your shoes and makeup, I'm gonna leave you."

"Oh no you're not!" Wilson says, aghast. "That's really not the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Ain't got time for that kind of drama," Tim shrugs, lapsing into dialect.

Wilson changes the subject. "[Women] love it when you can anticipate what they want, without expecting anything for it."

"The girl I'm going with now," Tim announces, "I always have to tell her to act like a lady. . . . If we're going to dinner, I want to get dressed up, [make] reservations. She'll say, 'I want Burger King.' And I tell her, 'You can't have it your way.'"

Wilson laughs despite herself. "Timothy! You're not graduating from this program till you can tell us a different story."

"Oh, I'll graduate. With honors. I'm a great guy."

—JENNIFER KORNREICH

PLAYING TO THE GOLDEN AGE OF FILM

Sound of Silents

I don't function in the 1990s," Stuart Oderman says. "I should've been born in the 1890s and died in 1955." Oderman has been playing the piano for silent movies for 38 years. To his chagrin, he wasn't born until 1940, but in his world, it is 1955. "When I said I wanted to play for silents," he says, smirking sweetly, "Gloria Swanson asked, 'Why not fix covered wagons?'"

In a given week you might find Oderman in his tuxedo accompanying Keaton and Chaplin shorts at Symphony Space, Louis Feuillade's *Judex*—six straight hours of it—at Anthology Film Archives, and John Ford's first feature, 1917's *Straight Shooting*, at the Walter Reade. This weekend he'll accompany three Erich von Stroheim films at MOMA. "If you play songs that are too familiar, the audience starts to hum and tap their feet," he says. "When I play for a western, I write a new western theme—sort of a combination of *High Noon* and *Looney Tunes*. I learned my music from watching Bugs Bunny."

A few silents have musical scores, and sometimes he'll be given the film's original cue sheets ("Page five: Baby in carriage on top of hill"). But mostly he improvises, armed with cues from his research. When a close-up of a record on a phonograph appears on screen, he'll nearly always play the song from memory. Comedies are toughest because of the timing: "The whole secret to silent comedies is coordinating to the feet."

Oderman (who began piano at nine) got his start under the guidance of, of all people, Lillian Gish. He introduced himself to her at a MOMA screening of *Broken Blossoms* when he was a 14-year-old from Newark, playing hooky to see silents. Years later, he asked her, "Why did you do all this for me?" and she said, "You looked like a nice little boy." At MOMA today he's the star. When he's done playing, he shuffles up the aisle surrounded by regulars bombarding him with cinematic lore. "ZaSu Pitts!" hollers one, guessing the inspiration for the Gish performance just ended. "You oughta be in pictures," Oderman answers back with a mischievous roll of the eyes.

It's a misunderstood vocation. "My mother would say to her friends,

'My son plays piano in the dark.' " He scoffs at the other silent-film pianists he knows of, both in New York ("I was playing before he was even born," he says of Film Forum's tinkler) and the rest of the country (one in Washington and one in L.A., "and that's two too many"). He has yet to play Gish to a protégé of his own, and he's in no hurry. "How much work are you gonna get?" he says. "I'm still alive."

—LAWRENCE LEVI

NEEDLE EXCHANGE STREET SMARTS

Free Lances

Hey baby, how ya doin'?" The voice booms out of Pauline Green's Amazonian body—six feet two and a half inches, 252 pounds—and envelops anyone in earshot like a bear hug. As she strides through the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx distributing condoms, bleach kits, and information about the needle exchange program she coordinates, Pauline calls everyone baby.

Most of the working girls, loitering teenagers, and nervous addicts lap up her spontaneous affection, but one man gets offended. "Don't call me baby," he says, rearing back unsteadily. "I'm a vet," he continues, listing a bit, then suddenly righting himself, "and calling me baby don't show no respect."

"Okay, baby," says Pauline before she can help herself. "I mean, Mr. Vet."

The vet, whose name is Charles, is taking two AIDS drugs, AZT and 3TC. But he's heard of some new medications—"protease inhibitors," Pauline tells him—and can he get them?

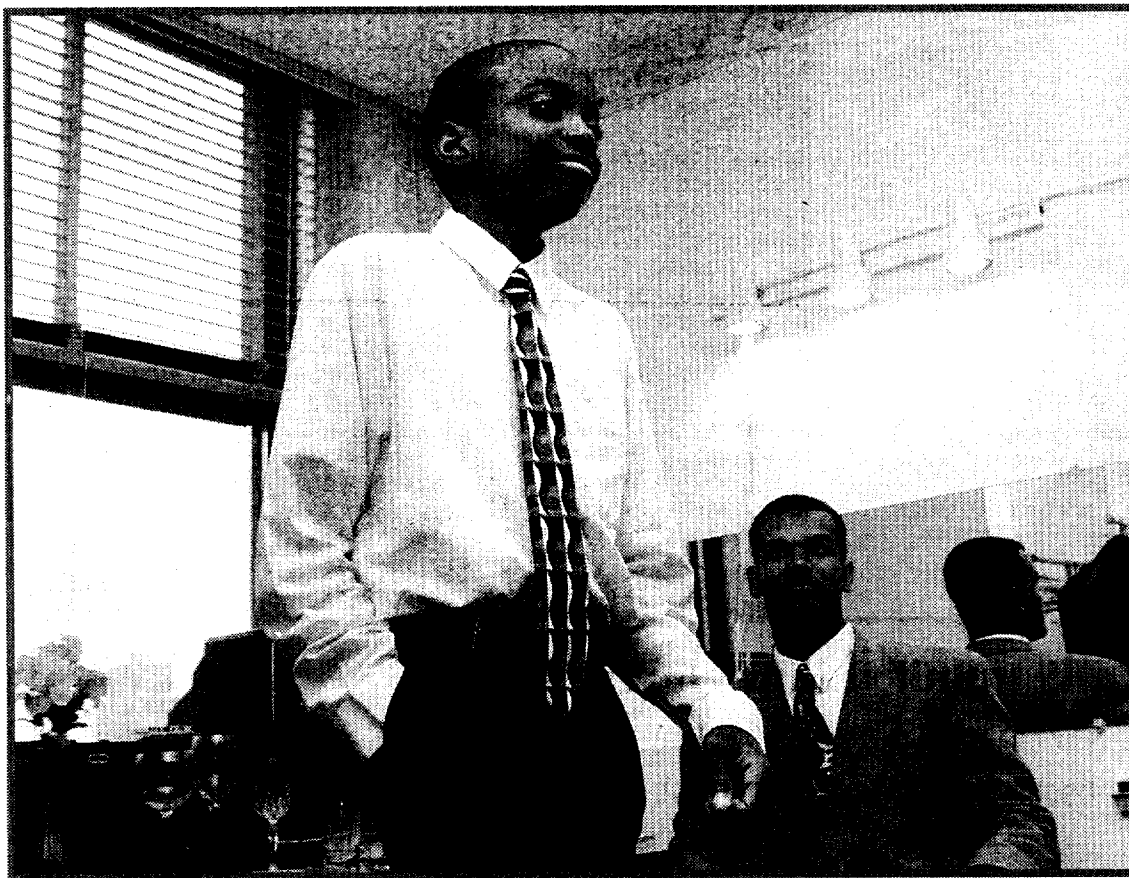
Pauline walks into a vacant lot where two shanty shacks are nestled among some dumpsters. Phil Baez, one of Pauline's coworkers, explains that the "owners" run them as a sort of hotel. The room rate? "A bag of dope or a piece of ass," explains Phil.

Pauline, Phil, and all the workers at New York Harm Reduction Educators try to get people into detox, but few kick drugs completely. Still, when it comes to the main task—keeping people from getting HIV—the program is "very effective," Pauline says emphatically. A recent study in the medical journal *The Lancet*—conducted locally with NYHRE—found that drug users halved their risk of contracting HIV if they used a needle exchange program.

The Lancet investigation is but the latest study to prove that needle exchange slows the spread of HIV and doesn't encourage drug abuse. But lacking federal and city funding, local needle exchange programs reach only about 10 per cent of New York's injection-drug users, says Reverend Margaret Reinfeld, executive director of NYHRE.

Which means that a lot more people will be asking Pauline the same question that Charles, the vet, asks: How can he get the extremely expensive new AIDS drugs? Pauline tells him to go to Bronx-Lebanon hospital, and if he wants more information to come visit her at the van. "I'll be there for ya," she says. Charles's drug high blends with this unsought affection, and he gets teary. He tells Pauline, "You can call me baby."

—MARK SCHOOF



Students at the Ophelia DeVore School learn how not to strut.